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Friday's Feature
by
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Winter Gardening Tips

December is a busy time with the holidays and that leaves precious little time for gardening. However, there is still plenty to do in the southern garden and landscape.

There is still time to plant many cold-hardy annuals including carnations, foxglove, flowering kale and cabbage, pansy, petunias, Shasta daisy and snapdragon. These cool season bloomers flower more profusely, and over a longer time, if set out during the fall and early winter, rather than early spring. And don't worry about the cold, these hold up well during our brief winter frosts and freezes.

If you still have pentas, ixora, heather or other cold-sensitive perennials, you may want to root a few cuttings. Extremely low temperatures can kill these cold-sensitive perennials. These can be rooted, potted and held until spring just as insurance against a killing freeze.

Fruit trees are now available at many garden centers. Be sure to select your fruit trees carefully. Success in growing fruits in our area is very dependent on choosing varieties that are adapted to our region. Homeowners who select the wrong cultivar will fail regardless of how much care and attention they provide.

Most deciduous fruit trees require accumulated exposure to cool temperatures during their winter dormancy in order to grow and fruit the following spring. This requirement is specific for each cultivar and is referred to as its chilling requirement. Chill hours are the number of accumulated hours below 45 degrees F.

Coastal areas in the Florida panhandle will receive approximately 400 chilling hours. More northern areas in the panhandle counties will typically receive 600 to 650 chill hours. Common cultivars grown in more northern climates are too high in chilling requirement to be grown successfully in Florida. Only those cultivars adapted to Florida's mild winter climate should be considered.

This time of year, only the cold hardiest of vegetables should be planted. Among those that can be planted now are beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, Chinese cabbage, kale, kohlrabi, leek, mustard, onions, parsley and radish. Once established, these vegetables grow and produce during the winter and early spring, with little risk of loss due to low temperatures.

Lawns also require some attention through the winter. Don't put away the lawn mower quite yet. If you have sown ryegrass seed, begin mowing the "over seeded" lawn as soon as it is tall enough to be clipped.

If you are thinking about sodding, you may want to wait until spring. Recently sodded grasses can be expected to be more severely damaged by intense cold. By delaying the planting of warm-season grasses until spring you decrease your chance of winter kill.

Even though our permanent warm-season grasses are slowing down and preparing to go dormant, be sure to monitor the soil moisture. Too much water during the winter can be a problem. But since roots continue to live throughout the winter, the grass does require some water. Dormant grass should receive water every ten to fourteen days either through rainfall or irrigation.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.